



Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge
USFWS photo

Purpose of and Need for Action

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Introduction and Background

This Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Shawangunk National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) was prepared pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 6688dd, et seq.; Refuge Improvement Act). An Environmental Assessment (EA), as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)¹, was prepared concurrent with the draft CCP.

This final CCP presents the combination of management goals, objectives, and strategies that we believe will best: achieve our vision for the refuge; contribute to the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) mission; achieve refuge purposes; fulfill legal mandates; address key issues; and incorporate sound principles of fish and wildlife management, and serve the American public. The CCP will guide management decisions and actions on the refuge over the next 15 years. It will also be used as a tool to help the State of New York natural resource agencies, our conservation partners, local communities, and the public understand our priorities.

This document has 5 chapters and 10 appendices. Chapter 1 is the “Purpose of and Need for Action” and it sets the stage for Chapters 2 through 5. It...

- describes the purpose of and need for a CCP.
- identifies national and regional mandates and plans that influenced this plan;
- highlights the purposes for which this refuge was established and presents its land acquisition history; and,
- presents the vision and goals for the refuge.

Chapter 2, “Planning Process”, describes the planning process we followed, including public and partner involvement, in the course of developing this final plan.

Chapter 3, “Refuge and Resource Descriptions”, describes the existing physical, biological, and human environment.

Chapter 4, “Management Direction and Implementation”, presents the general refuge management actions, and the goals, objectives and strategies that will guide decision-making and land management. It also outlines our staffing and funding needs to accomplish the management direction.

¹ P.L. 91–190; 42 U.S.C. 4321–4347, January 1, 1970; 83 Stat. 852, as amended

The Purpose of and Need for Action

Developing a CCP with partner and public involvement is vital for successfully managing every national wildlife refuge. The *purpose* of a CCP is to provide strategic management direction for the next 15 years, by:

- stating clearly the desired future conditions of refuge habitat, wildlife, visitor services, staffing, and facilities;
- providing a clear understanding of the reasons for refuge management actions to state agencies, refuge neighbors, visitors, and partners;
- conforming refuge management to the policies and goals of the Refuge System and its legal mandates;
- providing long-term continuity in refuge management;
- ensuring the compatibility of current and future public use; and,
- justifying our staffing, operating and maintenance, and annual budget requests.



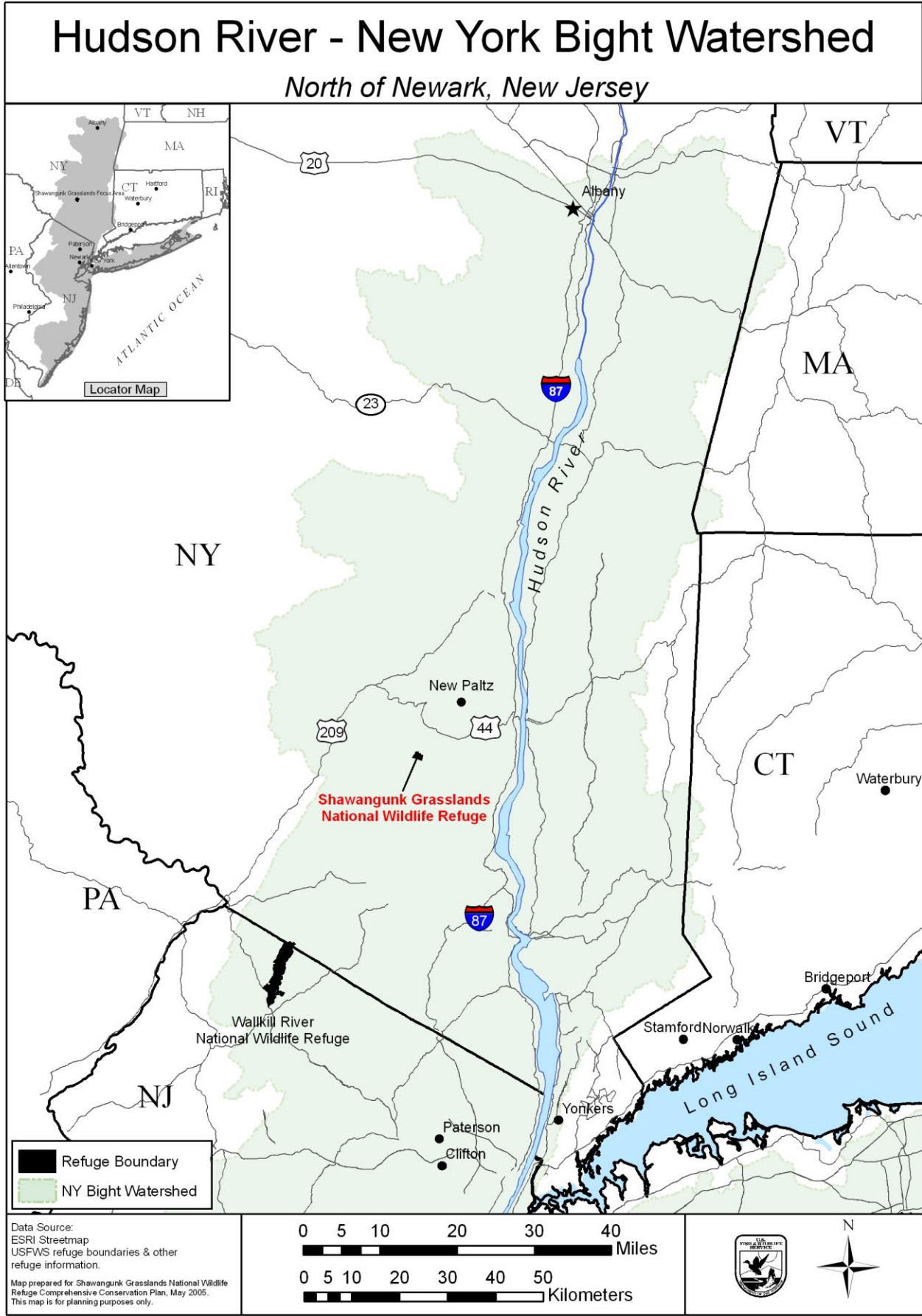
Savannah sparrow nest with young
Scott A. Vincent ©

The *need* to develop this CCP arose from the lack of a master plan to formally establish refuge management priorities, guide management actions, and measure their success. The refuge is relatively new and we have begun to establish relationships with neighboring communities, elected officials, and state natural resource agencies. We have opened the refuge to a few uses, but we wanted a public process to identify other potential compatible uses to evaluate. Raising awareness and gaining public support for our management actions will benefit the natural resources of the refuge, and the region.

This CCP will be reviewed and updated at least every 15 years in accordance with the Refuge Improvement Act and Service planning policy (602 FWS 1, 3 and 4).

Project Area

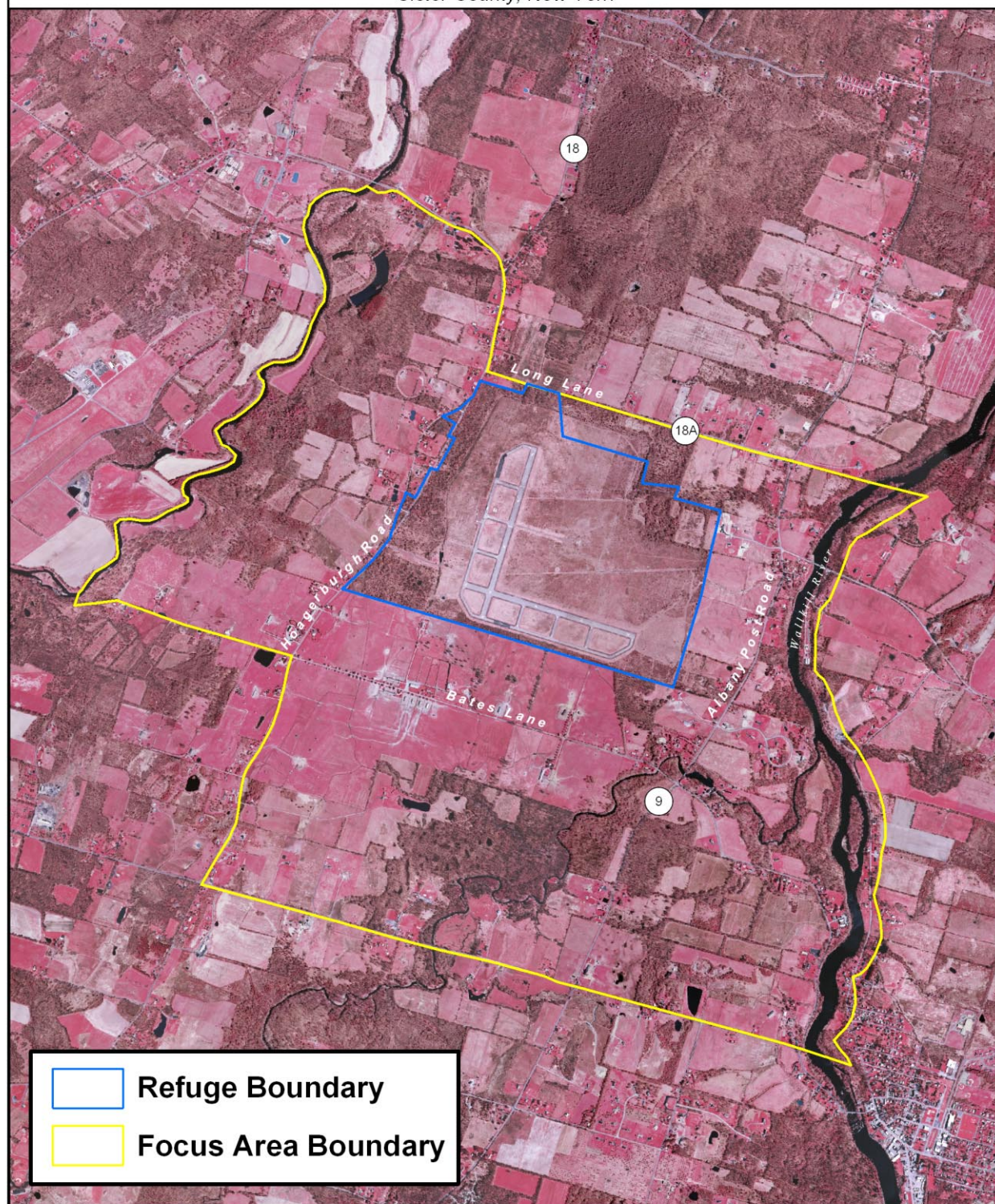
This 566-acre refuge lies in the Hudson River/New York Bight watershed, in the Town of Shawangunk, Ulster County, New York (map 1–1). The 3,486 acre Shawangunk Grasslands Refuge Focus Area (focus area) defines our project analysis area, and includes the refuge and contiguous lands with important wildlife habitats that also influence the quality of the refuge's natural resources (map 1–2).



1-4 Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge

Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge Focus Area

Ulster County, New York



Data Source:
New York State DOGO,
USFWS refuge boundaries & other
refuge information.

Map prepared for Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife
Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, December 2005.
This map is for planning purposes only.



The Service, its Policies and Legal Mandates

This section highlights the Service, the Refuge System, Service policy, laws, regulations, and mandates that directly influenced the development of this CCP.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its Mission

The Service, part of the Department of the Interior, administers the Refuge System. The Service mission is

“Working with others, to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Congress entrusts to the Service the conservation and protection of certain national resources: migratory birds and fish, Federal-listed endangered or threatened species, inter-jurisdictional fish, wetlands, certain marine mammals, and national wildlife refuges. We also enforce federal wildlife laws and international treaties on importing and exporting wildlife, assist States with their fish and wildlife programs, and help other countries develop conservation programs.

The Service manual, <http://www.fws.gov/directives/direct.html>, contains the standing and continuing directives to implement its authorities, responsibilities, and activities. Special Service directives that affect the rights of citizens or the authorities of other agencies are published separately in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), and are not duplicated in the Service manual. Most of the current regulations that pertain to the Service are issued in 50 CFR parts 1–99, available at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/index.html>.

The National Wildlife Refuge System, its Mission, and Policies

The Refuge System is the world’s largest collection of lands and waters set aside specifically for the conservation of wildlife and the protection of ecosystems. More than 545 national wildlife refuges are part of that national system today. They encompass more than 96 million acres of lands and waters in all 50 states and several island territories. More than 40 million visitors hunt, fish, observe and photograph wildlife, or participate in environmental education and interpretive activities on refuges across the nation each year.

In 1997, President William Jefferson Clinton signed into law the Refuge Improvement Act. That law established a unifying mission for the Refuge System, a new process for determining compatible public use activities on refuges, and the requirement to prepare CCPs for each refuge. The Refuge Improvement Act states that first and foremost, the Refuge System must focus on wildlife conservation. It further states that the mission of the Refuge System, coupled with the purpose(s) for which each refuge was established, will provide the principal management direction on that refuge. The mission of the Refuge System is

“to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

-Refuge Improvement Act; Public Law 105-57

The Refuge System manual provides a central reference for current policy governing the operation and management of the Refuge System not covered by the Service manual, including technical information on implementing refuge policies and guidelines. That manual can be reviewed at the Wallkill River Refuge Headquarters. A few noteworthy policies instrumental in developing this CCP follow.

Refuge System Planning Policy

This policy establishes requirements and guidance for Refuge System planning, including CCPs and step-down management plans. It states that we will manage all refuges in accordance with an approved CCP which, when implemented, will achieve refuge purposes; help fulfill the Refuge System mission; maintain and, where appropriate, restore the ecological integrity of each refuge and the Refuge System; help achieve the goals of the National Wilderness Preservation System; and meet other mandates [Fish and Wildlife Service Manual (602 FW 1,2,3)].



Pond at Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge
USFWS photo

Maintaining Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health Policy

This policy provides guidance on maintaining or restoring the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System including the protection of a broad spectrum of fish, wildlife, and habitat resources found in refuge ecosystems. It provides refuge managers with a process for evaluating the best management direction to prevent the additional degradation of environmental conditions and restore lost or severely degraded environmental components. It also provides guidelines for dealing with external threats to the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of a refuge and its ecosystem (601 FW 3).

Compatibility Policy

Federal law and Service policy provide the direction and planning framework to protect the Refuge System from incompatible or harmful human activities and ensure that Americans can enjoy Refuge System lands and waters. The Refuge Improvement Act is the key legislation regarding management of public uses and compatibility. The compatibility requirements of the Refuge Improvement Act were adopted in the Service's Final Compatibility Regulations and Final Compatibility Policy, published October 18, 2000 (Federal Register, Vol. 65, No. 202, pp. 62458–62496). This Compatibility Rule changed or modified Service regulations contained in chapter 50, parts 25, 26, and 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations (USFWS 2000c). To view the policy and regulations online, visit <http://policy.fws.gov/library/00fr62483.pdf>. Our summary follows.

The Refuge Improvement Act and its regulations require an affirmative finding by the refuge manager of the compatibility of an activity before it is allowed on a national wildlife refuge. This finding is documented in a report called a “compatibility determination.” A compatible use is one “...that will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the Refuge System or the purposes of the refuge” (Refuge Improvement Act). The Act defines six priority, wildlife-dependent uses that are to be given enhanced consideration on refuges: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. These priority uses may be authorized on a refuge when they are compatible and not inconsistent with public safety. At the time the compatibility determination is made, the refuge manager will insert the required maximum 10-year re-evaluation date for uses other than wildlife-dependent recreational uses, or a 15-year maximum re-evaluation date for wildlife-dependent recreational uses. However, the refuge manager may re-evaluate the compatibility of a use at any time (602 FW 2, Parts 2.11 and 2.12). For example, a decision may be revisited sooner than the mandatory date, or even before the CCP process is completed, if new information reveals unacceptable impacts or incompatibility with refuge purposes.

Moreover, not all uses that are determined compatible may be allowed. The refuge manager has the discretion to allow or deny any use based on other considerations such as public safety, policy, or available funding. Nevertheless, all uses that are allowed must be determined compatible. Except for consideration of consistency with State laws and regulations as provided for in subsec-

tion (m) of the Act, no other determinations or findings are required to be made by the refuge official under this Act, or the Refuge Recreation Act, for wildlife-dependent recreation to occur.

Other Mandates

Although Service and Refuge System policy and each refuge's purpose provide the foundation for its management, other federal laws, executive orders, treaties, interstate compacts, and regulations on the conservation and protection of natural and cultural resources also affect how national wildlife refuges are managed. The *Digest of Federal Resource Laws of Interest to the USFWS* lists many of them, and can be accessed at <http://laws.fws.gov/lawsdigest/indx.html>.

The November 2005 draft CCP/EA, Chapter 4 "Environmental Consequences," evaluated this plan's compliance with the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act and the Archeological Resources Protection Act. Moreover, in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and the Endangered Species Act we: consulted with the NY State Office Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation - Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau to affirm the proposed management actions would comply with NHPA section 106; and consulted with our New England Field Office for concurrence that our proposed management actions would not affect threatened or endangered species (appendix G). The environmental assessment was completed in accordance with NEPA.

Conservation Plans and Initiatives Guiding the Project

The resource plans and conservation initiatives below influenced the development of this CCP. They are presented hierarchically, from the regional to local level.

Birds of Conservation Concern (2002)

The Service developed this report in consultation with the leaders of bird conservation initiatives and partnerships such as Partners In Flight, the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan, and the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan. It fulfills the mandate of the 1988 amendment to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1980 (P.L. 100-653, Title VIII), which requires the Secretary of the Interior, through the Service, to "identify species, subspecies, and populations of all migratory nongame birds that, without additional conservation actions, are likely to become candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973."

The report is actually a series of 45 lists of bird species of conservation concern deemed the highest priority for national, regional, and landscape conservation. It includes a principal national list, seven regional lists corresponding to our seven regional administrative units, and species lists for each of the 37 Bird Conservation Regions in the United States designated and endorsed by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI). Those bird conservation regions are ecologically based units, as defined by NABCI for planning, implementing, and evaluating bird conservation.

This report is designed to stimulate coordinated efforts by Federal, state, and private agencies to develop and implement integrated approaches for the conservation and management of those birds deemed to be in the most need of conservation action. The refuge lies in the Appalachian Mountains Bird Conservation Region (BCR28). Nine of the BCR28 listed species occur on the refuge, including the Henslow's sparrow, a high conservation priority species. We considered each of those species to help us focus our habitat objectives, actions and strategies, and develop our Species of Conservation Concern List (appendix A).

Partners In Flight Landbird Conservation Plans



American woodcock
USFWS photo

In 1990, Partners in Flight (PIF) was conceived as a voluntary, international coalition of government agencies, conservation organizations, academic institutions, private industry, and other citizens dedicated to reversing the population

declines of bird species and “keeping common birds common.” The foundation of its long-term strategy for conserving birds is a series of scientifically based bird conservation plans, using physiographic provinces as the planning units.

The plans for each physiographic area rank bird species according to their conservation priority, describe desired habitat conditions, develop biological objectives, and recommend conservation actions. The priority rankings factor in habitat loss, population trends, and the vulnerability of a species and its habitats to regional and local threats. The physiographic plan that covers our project area is described in more detail below.

Physiographic Area 17—Northern Ridge and Valley (Draft 2003)

PIF Area 17, the Northern Ridge and Valley extends from southeastern Pennsylvania, through northwestern New Jersey and southeastern New York nearly to the base of the Adirondack Mountains. It includes portions of several major river valleys, including the Hudson, Delaware, and Susquehanna rivers. Ecologically, this is a transitional area, with forested ridges grading from primarily oak-hickory forests in the south to northern hardwood forests further north. Pine-oak woodlands and barrens and hemlock ravine forests are also important along ridges, whereas bottomland and riparian forests are important in the valleys which are now largely cleared for agricultural and urban development. Roughly 50 percent of the physiographic area is forested today, the vast majority occurring at higher elevations. About 40 percent of the area is in agricultural production, primarily a mixture of dairy pastureland and corn. Over 49,420 acres is state forest land in PA and NJ. Other important public lands include High Point State Park (NJ), the Wallkill River Refuge, and this refuge.

The top 17 priority species identified in the PIF Area 17 breed on the refuge. Our objectives for grasslands habitat emphasize Henslow's sparrow, upland sandpipers and bobolink, which are all priority species identified in the PIF plan. The final Area 17 PIF plan is available at http://www.blm.gov/wildlife/plan/pl_17_10.pdf. Other final PIF plans and information can be accessed at <http://www.partnersinflight.org>.

Significant Habitats and Habitat Complexes of the New York Bight Watershed (USFWS 1997)

Completed in 1997, the 1,025-page *Significant Habitats and Habitat Complexes of the New York Bight Watershed* focuses on the regional geographic distribution and population status of more than 1,000 key marine, coastal, and terrestrial species inhabiting this watershed. The geographic scope of the study covers the marine waters of the New York Bight (the Atlantic coastlines of Long Island and New Jersey out to the continental shelf), the New York — New Jersey Harbor Estuary and the entire watershed of the Bight and Harbor, including the Hudson River up to the Troy Dam.

The study assessed the status of habitats, threats to their integrity, and threats to the species dependent upon them. It also determined those habitats and fish, wildlife, and plant populations requiring immediate and long-term protection, conservation, enhancement, or restoration. This habitat assessment is being used to emphasize these regionally important sites to Federal, state, regional, and local planners, resource managers, conservation commissions, regulatory authorities, and the many private conservation organizations throughout the region. We used that study to identify resources of concern and develop management goals and objectives.

The Hudson River Estuary Action Plan and the Hudson River Biodiversity Project (2001)

In 1996, Governor Pataki released the first Hudson River Estuary Action Plan (<http://www.dec.state.ny.us>). Revised every 2 years, it provides the framework for all New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) agencies and those of other government agencies, academic institutions, and concerned citizens to join resources in protecting the entire Hudson River Estuary ecosystem. That ecosystem includes not only the Hudson River and its shoreline, but also considers the uplands in counties bordering the river.

The action plan's overarching goal is to "protect and conserve, restore and enhance the productivity and diversity of natural resources of the Hudson River estuary to sustain a wide array of present and future human benefits." The New York State legislature has appropriated funding through the Environmental Protection Fund and other sources, such as the Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act. An oversight committee is responsible for identifying and implementing projects that maintain terrestrial biodiversity in the ecosystem.

Particularly important to the refuge are the plan's tasks associated with terrestrial biodiversity. Action plan 2001 commitments include inventorying and assessing areas thought to have great significance for regional biodiversity and promoting their conservation through voluntary measures; providing training on biodiversity conservation; studying the relationship of breeding bird diversity to habitat patterns and trends in the Hudson Valley; and, continuing the use of biological controls to reduce purple loosestrife. The plan's goals and action items helped our planning team establish management goals and objectives on the refuge.

New York Open Space Conservation Plan (Draft November 2005)

The New York Open Space Conservation Plan is revised every 3 years by the Offices of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. Every region in the state has formed an advisory committee that includes representatives from state agencies, land trusts, county officials, and citizens groups. The committees identify priority areas for inclusion in the plan. It is not a regulatory document, but it conveys to municipalities the recommendations of the State of New York for maintaining open space.

The draft plan of November 2005 includes areas of regionally significant biodiversity adjacent to the refuge: the Shawangunk Kill Corridor (Ulster and Orange Counties); the Wallkill River Corridor (Ulster and Orange Counties), and the Galeville Grasslands, which includes the refuge. The descriptions of the significant resources in this plan helped our team establish management priorities and objectives.

Refuge Establishment History and Purpose**Refuge Establishment History**

In 1994, the United States Military Academy at West Point declared excess to its mission the 621 acres of land containing the former Galeville Army Training Site in the Town of Shawangunk, Ulster County, New York. We expressed our interest in that land. On July 27, 1999, the General Services Administration transferred, at no cost to the Service, 566 acres to create a new national wildlife refuge, and subsequently transferred the balance of 55 acres to the Town of Shawangunk to create a community park, under the Federal Lands to Parks Program administered by the National Park Service. We have posted refuge boundary signs to identify the 566-acre refuge; no other lands have been added since it was established. Officially, the transfer of land that established the refuge occurred under the following authorities: the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949,² which allows for property transfers from one Federal agency to another; and the Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife Conservation Purposes Act of 1948.³

Refuge Purpose

The official refuge purpose listed in the Refuge System database is to provide its “...particular value in carrying out the national migratory bird management program” (16 U.S.C. 667b, An Act Authorizing the Transfer of Certain Real Property for Wildlife). However, this purpose was further refined in a memorandum dated October 17, 1997, to the General Services Administration from our Regional Director, emphasizing the importance of the site to wintering raptors and breeding and migrating grassland birds. The memorandum formally requested the transfer of land and defined the primary reason for establishing the refuge as: “[the site] provides critical habitat for migratory birds and raptors. More than 120 species of birds have been identified at the Site. It supports approximately 20 species of Federal or State ‘management or special concern.’”

Refuge Administration

This refuge is un-staffed. It is administered by staff from the Wallkill River Refuge Headquarters in Sussex, New Jersey.

² 40 U.S.C. 471et seq., repealed by Public Law 107-217, August 21, 2002

³ 16 U.S.C. 667b; P. L. 80-537, as amended

Existing Refuge Operational Plans

Step-Down Plans

The Service Manual (602 FW 4, “Refuge Planning Policy”) lists more than 25 step-down management plans that may be appropriate for a refuge to ensure safe, effective and efficient operations. However, not all of these plans are necessary on every refuge. The plans translate general goals and objectives into specific strategies and action schedules. Some require annual revision; others are revised on 5- or 10-year schedules. Some require additional NEPA analysis, public involvement, and compatibility determinations before we can implement them. These step-down management plans, already underway, are scheduled for completion as follows:

- Habitat Management Plan (HMP, our highest priority; within 1 year of CCP approval)
- Habitat and Species Monitoring and Inventory Plan (HSMIP; within 2 years of CCP approval)
- Fire Management Plan (included in this final CCP; appendix F)

Compatibility Determinations

Appendix B includes compatibility determinations for priority public uses and several other refuge uses we propose for the refuge. In addition, we have included the final compatibility determination for model airplane flying and model airplane competitive events, approved and dated February 20, 2002, which determined these activities were not compatible with the refuge purposes or the mission of the Refuge System. This use is described in more detail in chapter 3, Refuge and Resource Descriptions. We are incorporating this existing decision on model airplane flying and model airplane competitive events into the CCP (appendix B).

Refuge Vision Statement

Early in the planning process, our team developed this vision statement for the refuge to provide a guiding philosophy and sense of purpose for its plan.

The Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge, located in Ulster County, New York, provides exceptional grassland habitat within the Wallkill River watershed, a major tributary to the Hudson River. We will enhance and sustain this high quality habitat for the full complement of grassland-dependent birds that breed, winter and migrate through, the watershed. Other native grassland-dependent animals and regionally rare plants benefit from our management as well. With easy public access to the refuge’s managed grasslands, and because of the open vistas the grasslands afford, it is an ideal setting for wildlife observation, nature photography, and environmental interpretation. All visitors will feel welcomed and encouraged to enjoy and appreciate the contribution of this refuge to the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Refuge Goals

Our planning team developed these goals after reviewing the Refuge System mission, the purpose of the refuge, our vision statement, public and partner comments, policy guidelines, and natural and regional conservation initiatives.

Goal 1. Protect and enhance habitats for Federal trust species and other species of special management concern, with particular emphasis on grassland-dependent migratory birds and wintering raptors.

Goal 2. Manage to enhance regionally significant ecological communities, including large grassland complexes.

Goal 3. Promote actions which contribute towards a healthier Wallkill River.

Goal 4. Provide high quality opportunities for wildlife observation and photography, and other priority, wildlife-dependent uses.

Goal 5. Cultivate a public informed and educated about conservation who work to support the goals of the refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.